



The Color Purple

If you've been taking part in our Gospel Conversations, happening at 9.30am each Sunday before this service, looking at the Acts of the Apostles, then you'll be aware of the invitation to arrive a little early each Sunday – not just for the coffee and croissants, but for the opportunity to report back and reflect on how and when you've been aware of the Holy Spirit in your daily lives; to explore what from this rich and far reaching story has resonated in your life from Monday through to Saturday. I wonder how many of us have a sense of God and the Holy Spirit at work in our lives and indeed whether we consider that a real possibility? A new study¹ is suggesting that 62% of British adults believe some form of miracle is possible today. 50% of those who attend a religious service at least monthly say they have prayed for a miracle and which was answered in the way they had hoped and 37% of Christians have never prayed for a miracle.

But what does or might the Holy Spirit at work in our lives look and feel like? Probably not often miracles. For the Spirit moves and works in all manner of ways. Every answer will be different. Some may sound dramatic or at least strong and definitive – a clear sense or too many coincidences to ignore. Others may be more vague and nebulous: an echo, a feeling you couldn't quite explain; a sense you couldn't quite put your finger on; an inkling or notion that seemed to come from out of the ether but wouldn't go away. Or maybe it's been in the form of a suggestion or nudge from someone else that was too perfectly timed to be pure chance. If you're not sure you'd have anything to contribute to such a conversation, then I urge you to come anyway, for it's often in hearing

how God is at work in the lives of others that we become more attuned ourselves, or even begin to sense a bigger picture from out of the jumbled jigsaw pieces that make up our own lives and interior worlds.

In the ancient world and in the Early Church, God was often at work in in visions – an idea less common and perhaps even alien to us today, when we might be a little sceptical of someone who believes God is using their dreams to speak to them, but back then it was a regular if not frequent occurrence. At Pentecost (in chapter 2 of Acts), when the disciples are filled with the Holy Spirit and suddenly fluent in other languages, Peter tells the amazed crowd that the words of the Old Testament prophet Joel are being fulfilled:

“In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.”

These experiences go hand in hand with a whole variety of signs and wonders in the book of Acts as Luke tells the story of the growth of the early Church, of how the apostles – guided, inspired and empowered by the Holy Spirit – continued the work of Christ; how they travelled and preached and taught and healed the sick and cast out demons and even, in the case of Paul, as was read downstairs this morning, raised from the dead a young man who had fallen out of a third floor window when he nodded off during one of Paul's longer talks.

¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-45679730>

The Book of Acts is a rich and exciting text, a compendium of the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the disciples and apostles in the first days of Church. It's dramatic and far-ranging, not only in terms of their growing confidence, courage and abilities but also in terms of their travels, which spread out from Jerusalem through the Holy Land and beyond. Whereas Luke's Gospel traces Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, his sequel, the Acts of the Apostles, traces the spread of the Church from Jerusalem out towards, in the words of Christ, "the ends of the earth."

I'm not very widely travelled but I've always been struck how when joining in the Eucharist in churches in other countries where I don't speak the language, the rhythm and shape of the Eucharist - that act of worship and hospitality which recounts and remembers the central event of our faith - is so familiar that you still know where you are and what's happening at each stage of the service. I find in that experience a deep sense of homecoming and belonging, however unfamiliar the style of the worship or the words of the hymns and prayers may be.

This short story we've heard in our reading today, of the conversion of Lydia, traces a crucial development in that journey. In the few verses before our reading begins, we are told how Paul's travel plans in Asia Minor were continually thwarted by the Holy Spirit, also described as the spirit of Jesus. One can only wonder what shape this thwarting took as the text doesn't give us any clues. But it's this continual nudging in different directions from where Paul was originally heading, combined with a night time vision, that leads him and his companions - for the very first time - to Europe. In his dream, Paul sees a man from Macedonia, pleading for them to come and help. The experience is sufficiently powerful for them to change course and set sail immediately. It's interesting to note that at this stage in the narrative, the language changes from 'they' to 'we'. As they set sail it seems our narrator Luke either accompanying Paul and Silas and their other

companions, or sharing from a diary from one of them.

When they land they head to Philippi, the leading city of the area. They stay for a few days and on the Sabbath, head to the river outside of the city looking for a place of prayer. This small detail points to the scale of their ministry. Normally on their travels on the Sabbath they would head to the synagogue to talk with the people there, but here in Philippi, it seems there is no synagogue. This tells us that there were less than 10 Jewish men in the city, in this Roman colony - as the quorum for Jewish worship was 10. So, those who wanted to worship would have met outside the city gates, ideally near a river, a source of water for ritual cleansing. It is here that they find people praying - not the man of Macedonia from Paul's vision, rather a group of women, one of whom, Lydia, comes from Asia Minor, where Paul was prevented speaking the word by the Holy Spirit. Once again, they are being led by the Spirit into new places, new situations, new encounters and a whole new way of being.

After the dramatic conversion of Paul on the road to Damascus, the conversion of Lydia might seem rather low key. Paul and Silas speak with the women, and as a result, Lydia is baptised, presumably immediately and in the river, and then invites them to stay. But this is something special - this is the Holy Spirit working overtime. Paul and Silas are not here by chance and nor is Lydia. She stands out for a number of reasons.

Firstly, she is named. Paul often gets a bad wrap when it comes to women - often due to his guidance to specific congregations in specific situations at specific times being taken out of context. Not many women are named in the Bible. Think of Noah's wife. But when you read through Acts and many of Paul's own epistles, you'll find that a number of women are named - Tabitha, Dorcas, Rhoda, Priscilla, Phoebe, Euodia and Syntyche, all of whom play a part in helping build the early Church. Paul is preaching a

gospel in which there are no divisions; in which all really are equal and all really are welcome.

We're told that Lydia was a worshipper of God, it's not clear whether she was a Gentile seeker or Jewish. What is clear is that she is an independent woman of means; she hails from Thyatira in Asia Minor, and has her own business and home. It is her business that brings her to Philippi. She deals in purple cloth, an extravagance that only the wealthy could afford – purple was a symbol of status, dignity and royalty. The placing of a purple robe on Christ before his crucifixion was an act of deliberate mockery. So Lydia presumably shuts up shop to come outside the city gates to this place of prayer on the Sabbath, and her seeking is rewarded when God opens her heart to Paul's teaching and she becomes the very first Christian convert in Europe. Her whole household is also baptised – again there is no suggestion that she is beholden to anyone. Immediately she opens her home to Paul and his companions and prevails upon them to stay – the only other time we see that wording used is when the disciples on the road to Emmaus prevail upon Jesus to stay the night.

And so, this woman of independent means becomes the host not only of Paul, Silas and their companions, but also of the first Christian community, the first Christian church in Europe. It is to Lydia's house that Paul and Silas return when they are later imprisoned and then released and we see from Paul's later epistles what fond memories he has of his time there and in what affection he holds this early Christian community.

It's only when we pause to reflect upon this story that we can begin to understand its richness and resonance. Lydia, this independent woman making her way in a world run by men, demonstrates both the contemplative nature of Mary and the activity of Martha, and plays a key role in the foundation and development of the church in Europe.

We often talk of discernment in terms of exploring a call to ministry, but during the summer we began opening out that conversation and understanding to embrace the ways in which we relate and respond to God. For those now upon the Gospel conversations journey through Acts - and it's never too late to join – the invitation is to discern, to pay particular attention and be alert to the ways in which God is at work in our lives. It's not often in sudden conversions like Paul, and more likely comes about from the kind of seeking and openness we find in Lydia, who is questing and curious, who engages faithfully in places and situations where encounter can happen. I don't suppose when she came to the riverside that Sabbath, she had any expectation that she would be baptised that day, but what's important is that she came. Perhaps part of our sensing the Holy Spirit in our lives is learning to make ourselves available, in showing up, in keeping on keeping on.

I cannot read Lydia's story without thinking of another more recent story. In Alice Walker's Pulitzer prize winning, *The Color Purple*, the main character Celie is a world away from Lydia. We meet her at age 14, a black girl born into slavery in the American South in the first half of the 20th century. Throughout a life of cruelty, violence, injustice and abuse Celie struggles to relate to God who she thinks of as an old bearded white man who doesn't listen to her and is inextricably bound up with the white patriarchy of which she is a victim.

It is through encounters with other women, and one particular free-spirited woman friend that she is able to move beyond that culturally ingrained and imposed image and discover a new way of relating to both God and others. This involves thinking of God as beyond gender and for Celie, using the pronoun 'it'.

I am reminded of Celie when I read about Lydia. As Celie matures and finally achieves liberty and financial independence, she starts her own business designing and making

clothes. Having had no choice but to wear drab colours for most of her life, the first dress she is able to choose for herself is purple. So often, God's Spirit works in our lives through others, to offer comfort and support in times of heartache; hope in the face of despair; loyalty in the face of betrayal and love in the face of hatred. Through the support and encouragement of others, in whom I see the Holy Spirit at work just as the Spirit works through Paul and Silas and Lydia, Celie's relationship with God is transformed, the jumbled jigsaw pieces finally fit together to show a bigger beautiful picture and she recognises the God who is love, the 'it' whose will for us is life in all its fullness: "I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it. People think pleasing God is all God cares about. But any fool living in the world can see it always trying to please us back."²

Christ our teacher
you reach into our lives
not through instructions, but story.
Open our hearts to be attentive to the
promptings of your Spirit,
that seeing, we may perceive,
and hearing we may understand,
and understanding, may act upon your
word,
in your name and for your glory.
Amen.

Lindsay Meader

² Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*